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SUBJECT: RWANDA COMMITTED TO ADDRESSING CHILD LABOR BUT LACKS FUNDING

**¶1.** Summary: In a meeting February 24, UNICEF indicated that while child labor is a problem in Rwanda, child trafficking and prostitution do not appear to be prevalent. UNICEF-Rwanda Head of Child Protection attributed the incidence of child labor to the large number of vulnerable orphans, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war and 1994 genocide, who do not have access to basic needs. She noted that while Rwanda has child labor laws as part of its labor code, there are gaps in the code. The Rwandan government has acknowledged those gaps and demonstrated political commitment to addressing the problem. It has drafted an action plan, which includes revision of its labor code, and has expressed interest in a nationwide International Labor Organization (ILO) survey that would measure the extent of child labor in Rwanda. However, the recent government restructuring and lack of funding have delayed progress. End summary.

**¶2.** Alessandra Dentice, UNICEF-Rwanda Head of Child Protection, told PolCouns February 24 that child labor is a problem in Rwanda, although she is not aware of any organized network of perpetrators. Children (ages 1-18) comprise 52 percent of the total population, according to a 2002 census. Of the 4.2 million children in Rwanda, 352,550 (47 percent boys, 53 percent girls) are engaged in child labor, including 83.1 percent in the commercial agricultural sector, 11.9 percent in the domestic sector, 1.2 percent in commerce, and 0.7 percent in the manufacturing sector. (Note: According to data from the Ministry of Education, approximately 91.5 percent of primary school-aged boys and 94.5 percent of primary school-aged girls were attending school in 2003-04. End note.) Dentice noted that child labor is under-reported. She said that although commercial sector exploitation is a problem, the more serious and under-reported problem is domestic child labor.

**¶3.** She attributed the problem of child labor in Rwanda to the large number of children orphaned and heading households in the aftermath of the civil war and 1994 genocide which claimed the lives of up to a million people. In addition, widespread poverty is a contributing factor. She estimated that 106,000 households are headed by children and that Rwanda, with 1.3 million orphans, or approximately 30 percent of the total population of children, has one of the highest proportions of orphans in the region compared to the total population of children. (Note: The GOR classifies children with one parent as orphans. End note.) Of the 1.3 million orphans, 160,000 are affected by HIV/AIDS, according to an estimate from the 2004 UN HIV/AIDS global report. She noted that while not all orphans are vulnerable, most are susceptible due to lack of access to education, a steady income, a protective environment, parental care and guidance, basic services such as food and medical care, and a government safety net.

¶ 14. While UNICEF-Rwanda does not have an official position and does not keep statistics on child trafficking as it does not deal with trafficking issues, Dentice said that child trafficking and child sex tourism do not appear to be problems in Rwanda. She noted that there is some child prostitution but was unable to provide an estimate of its incidence in the absence of UNICEF data. UNICEF has provided piecemeal assistance to an NGO (Sharing Rwanda) to address the problem of children, especially street children, involved in commercial sector exploitation. UNICEF-Rwanda Child Protection Officer Toihir Mlahaili estimated that 7,000 children throughout the country currently live on the street.

¶ 15. The ILO Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) would like to conduct a nationwide, scientific survey of child labor in Rwanda. Dentice indicated that the government has shown strong interest in the project and for the past two to three years has urged ILO to conduct the survey, but lack of funding has been an issue. UNICEF has begun fundraising for the survey, which ILO estimates would cost USD 150,000, based on population figures, and would take from six months up to a year to complete. ILO has offered to pay for the first mission and is relying on donor support for subsequent missions. Dentice noted that the U.S. Department of Labor funded similar surveys in other African countries last year, but that Rwanda was not on the short list. She said that because ILO works on the basis of donor interests, its work depends on where donors want ILO to go. ILO has received funding from the U.S. and France, but currently Rwanda is not on the list.

¶ 16. Dentice highlighted the need for the survey, pointing out that it would be the first such survey in Rwanda and the only scientific survey that would give an indication of the extent of child labor, including commercial sector exploitation, throughout the country. According to Dentice, the dilemma is that no one views child labor as a priority, and, therefore, donors are reluctant to fund the survey. If there is no survey to show that child labor is a problem, donors will not donate. If donors do not donate, ILO cannot conduct the survey.

¶ 17. She pointed out that the Rwandan government has shown strong commitment and interest in addressing the problem of child labor. At the end of 2005, the Ministry of Public Service and Labor (MIFOTRA) drafted a long-term national strategic plan of action on child labor, which identified and addressed rights at risk, including the right to education, right to an adequate standard of living, right to protection against all forms of discrimination, abuse, and exploitation, and right to parental guidance and care.

¶ 18. Note: Since 1997, the Government has been committed to combating child labor. However, activities have been limited in scope due to limited funds and experts and lack of an integrated national plan of action. As a result, development of a long-term integrated national action plan was recommended by the Second National Conference on Child Labor in November 2003 to address victims of the worst forms of child labor, especially in the areas of the country most affected. The plan of action was drafted in 2005 with reference to the 2003 national policy on orphans and other vulnerable children, of which child laborers constitute one of 12 categories. End note.

¶ 19. The plan, which has not yet been approved by the Cabinet, also includes revision of the labor code. Although currently Rwanda has a civil labor code which includes laws against child labor, there are gaps in the code. Dentice noted that it does not cover all elements of ILO Convention 182 (ratified in 1999 and signed in May 2000), which addresses the worst forms of child labor, and ILO Convention 138 (ratified and signed in 1980), which covers the minimum age for employment, which varies from country to country.

¶10. Dentice said that the GOR is aware of the gap and has already conducted a survey of all local laws relating to children. The Ministry of Justice intends to conduct a review of those laws with a view to establishing a comprehensive children's code to protect the rights of children. The Minister of State is very committed to the GOR action plan, and MIFOTRA has asked UNICEF to assist the GOR in presenting the plan to donors once it has been approved. The problem, said Dentice, is lack of funding and lack of a government focal point on child labor issues. Prior to the government restructuring, the central point of contact was a consultant in the Ministry of Labor, who was hired on a temporary three-year basis.

¶11. Comment: The GOR's commitment to addressing the issue of child labor is a positive sign of its acknowledgment of problems that need to be resolved. Child labor is an issue that the government is willing and ready to resolve, with support from the donor community. Post would appreciate guidance as to whether funding from Department of Labor or other sources might be available for the survey and the GOR national strategic plan of action.

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